

THE GULF WAR A CRITICAL ESSAY

BY
SUN TZU

Editor's Note: *This essay, written by the famous Chinese military theoretician Sun Tzu, proposes a thesis which ought to provoke considerable discussion among theoreticians in training at the National War College. Sun Tzu's thesis is that the President's handling of the Gulf crisis was a failure leading up to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It resulted from his reluctance, based on uncertain intelligence, to employ national power to deter Saddam Hussein's aggression. Nevertheless, Sun Tzu holds that the decision to use force to oppose Saddam and the ensuing military operation was a great success, employing Sun Tzu's principles. However, the final determination of the success of the Coalition's actions is uncertain, dependent on continued stability in the region.*

I. Prior to 6 August 1990: Strategic Decision Making

"What is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy"

"He who excels at resolving difficulties does so before they arise. He who excels in conquering his enemies triumphs before threats materialize."

During this period U.S. strategy was faulty. Intelligence estimates were able to identify the possibility of an Iraqi adventure against Kuwait as early as November 1989 and military plans for this contingency were begun in May 1990. Iraqi intentions proved elusive. When Iraq moved military forces to threaten Kuwait, the National Command Authority was warned. Nevertheless, all available assessments, including those from the region, strongly indicated Iraq would not use military force to achieve its goals. Evidence available indicates that the final decision to attack Kuwait was made by Saddam at the last moment. If the United States and the international community had taken prompt and decisive action to deter the Iraqi use of force, the entire DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM operation might have been avoided. In the future,

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it would be wise to consider aggressive use of deterrence when intentions are uncertain, especially when confronting a one man decision body.

THE ESTIMATE: "War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied."

When confronted with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the President's estimate of the situation appeared correctly to focus on five factors; moral influence, weather, terrain, command and doctrine.

By moral influence, I mean that which causes the people to be in harmony with their leaders. In this instance, President Bush and his staff correctly gauged the emotions of the American people. At this early time it was probably difficult to determine the depth of the feelings held by the nation. The support of the American people could easily have eroded as the war dragged on. However, the continued play in the media on the correctness of Bush's actions, the evilness of Saddam's actions and the support of the United Nations all were orchestrated to produce a lasting moral base for the American administration. This was the most important estimate.

Regarding Iraqi moral support for the war, there was considerable popular approval for Saddam's move into Kuwait. The Iraqi people were aware of historical Iraqi claims to Kuwait. Additionally, Saddam had absolute control over the population through a pervasive and powerful secret police and Baath Party structure. He thus enjoyed a much stronger hand than the Coalition in maintaining the moral factor. This was an important factor in President Bush's calculation of strategic objectives and probably resulted in his wisely not including the ouster of Saddam Hussein in his strategic objectives announced on 6 August, nor did he push to include it in any of the 14 U.N. resolutions pertaining to the war.

By weather I mean the interaction of natural forces; the effects of winter's cold and summer's heat and the conduct of military operations in accordance with the seasons. In the Theater of Operations these factors are of critical importance, impacting on equipment and personnel, particularly the ground forces. The Iraqi invasion occurred in early August, the hottest and driest season of the year. Clear weather assisted the air forces of both sides but posed a severe hardship on ground forces. The Iraqi soldiers were perhaps better conditioned to operate in the heat of summer; however, the American troops had also trained in a desert environment and had much better logistics support for such critical items as fresh water. Fortunately, the Coalition forces had no realistic option but the defensive during the hottest part of the year when any offensive action would be opposed by the enemy and the weather. In this case weather was a positive consideration for President Bush.

By terrain I mean distances, whether the ground is traversed with ease or difficulty, whether it is open or constricted, and the chances of life or death. In the Kuwait Theater of Operations, distances were great between Iraqi forces in Kuwait and potential objectives in Saudi Arabia; the oil fields of the Eastern Province and Riyadh. The distances were not so great, relatively speaking, for the Coalition forces to drive the Iraqis back to their borders. The terrain did not provide narrow places which could be easily defended by infantry. It favored mechanized forces which, in the early days, the Iraqis greatly outnumbered the Coalition. This was an important factor in the President's calculus. By deploying U.S. forces quickly, the first to arrive would be woefully inadequate in terms of armored force to block any Iraqi advance. However, over time, sufficient mechanized forces could be generated by sealift to overcome the initial Iraqi advantage. The President would have to consider carefully these factors in testing the depth of his commitment should the Iraqi forces move south, potentially causing mortal destruction to elite U.S. forces. Therefore, terrain favored the Iraqis in the initial stages, but was susceptible to erosion over time.

By command I mean the general's qualities of wisdom, sincerity, humanity, courage, and strictness. In these factors President Bush had a clear advantage over Saddam Hussein. Saddam is a ruthless, self-centered tyrant who lacks military expertise and often alienates his generals. Nevertheless, his personal courage and strictness were unquestioned, and his ability to force the armed forces to carry out his instructions were absolute. However, the extreme centralization of decision making made his command and control system vulnerable and the ability of his field commanders to react in a fast paced war was questionable. President Bush enjoyed the clear advantage in the command factor.

By doctrine I mean organization, control, assignment of appropriate ranks to officers, regulation of supply routes, and the provision of principal items used by the army. In considering this factor President Bush had the clear advantage of a highly sophisticated and developed service doctrine. Joint doctrine was less well developed, but far superior to Iraq's. The U.S. had an additional concern; the organization, control and supply of a coalition force. In President Bush's calculation, the advantages of having an international force opposing the Iraqis added greatly to the moral factor and outweighed any degradation of his clear superiority in doctrine over the Iraqis.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES: In this period, President Bush carefully considered strengths and weaknesses of both sides. Iraq enjoyed many advantages. They occupied the field of battle first and those who came later arrived weary from their long journey. The Iraqis enjoyed a vast superiority in numbers, forcing the Coalition to prepare against him. When the Iraqis retained the offensive advantage, they forced the Coalition to prepare to fight in many places, although the limited nature of their objectives and geography diminished this advantage. At this point, time was their

enemy, if they wanted to advance into Saudi Arabia; their friend, if they intended to defend and did not believe the Coalition would mount an offensive to oust them. The United Nations Coalition Forces, led by the United States, had few short-term advantages. One of these was a vastly superior intelligence capability. Following the invasion, intelligence was able to support the national command authority with up-to-the-minute Iraqi troop dispositions and capabilities. The great weakness of this was the lack of intelligence on enemy intentions. Additionally, Coalition Forces could quickly implement UN Resolution 661 imposing economic sanctions on Iraq.

II. 7 August 1990 - 16 January 1991: *Operational Planning*

THE ESTIMATE: During this stage the moral factor of war was carefully contemplated by the Coalition, both in the United Nations and the U.S. Congress. The affirmation of national and international objectives by the U.N. and Congressional resolutions was fundamental to this. The pursuit of other than military means to achieve victory was essential.

In examining the weather, it was judged most advantageous to attack during the cooler months of January and February, before the hot weather and sandstorms.

Regarding the terrain, it was determined that while there were no major obstacles to strategic movement, features such as the Wadi al Batin and large areas of unfavorable terrain for wheeled vehicles were used as boundaries or bypassed. The great advantage in mobility enabled the Coalition to plan a large and swift sweeping maneuver to the West enveloping the Iraqis in and near Kuwait.

Factors of command and doctrine held challenges for the Coalition as they struggled to mold a cohesive, effective fighting force and plan an attack that would make maximum use of their individual strengths and protect their weaknesses. In these factors the Coalition was exceptionally successful.

WEAKNESSES AND STRENGTHS: “If I am able to determine the enemy’s dispositions while at the same time I conceal my own then I can concentrate and he must divide. And if I concentrate while he divides, I can use my entire strength to attack a fraction of his. There, I will be numerically superior. Then, if I am able to use many to strike few at the selected point, those I deal with will be in dire straits.”

The Coalition forces used their intelligence resources wisely to keep watch over their opponent while they concealed their own deployments. At times the media facilitated these deception efforts. By having an accurate, timely picture of Iraqi dispositions, the Coalition deployed their defensive forces to maximum advantage while planning an offensive campaign to exploit Iraqi weaknesses.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE OPERATIONAL PLAN:

Defense: “When I wish to avoid battle I may defend myself simply by drawing a line on the ground; the enemy will be unable to attack me because I divert him from going where he wishes.”

By interposing Coalition forces between Iraqi forces and strategic points in Saudi Arabia, the Iraqis were deterred by the President’s “line in the sand”.

Offense: “Your aim must be to take All-under-Heaven intact. Thus your troops are not worn out and your gains will be complete. This is the art of offensive strategy.”

The offensive plan was developed to take maximum advantage of the speed and air power of the Coalition in order to achieve a complete victory with minimum casualties. This objective was achieved in an unprecedented manner.

Employment of Secret Agents: “What is called ‘foreknowledge’ cannot be elicited from spirits, nor from gods, nor by analogy with past events, nor from calculations. It must be obtained from men who know the enemy situation.”

The U.S. and its Western Coalition partners played a critical role in providing strategic, operational and tactical intelligence to the national leadership as well as the

operational commanders. National technical means were combined with theater assets to obtain a very complete and up-to-date picture of the battlefield. The relatively sophisticated nature of the target and the demands of stealthy and precision guided weapons placed unprecedented demands on accurate intelligence assessments. Difficulties were encountered in providing timely and complete dissemination of intelligence material to the end customer in theater and there was a lack of information on enemy intentions at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.

III. 17 January 1991- 28 February 1991: *Waging War*

“Victory is the major object in war. If this is long delayed, weapons are blunted and morale depressed. When troops attack cities, their strength will be exhausted.”

In this conflict Coalition weapons were sharp, their morale high and the victory swift. I would have earlier estimated that the Coalition delayed the offensive too long and the killing of Iraqi soldiers was excessive. However, when considering the need to minimize Coalition casualties, these strategies were best and my theory needs adjusting. The enemy did surrender in large numbers and were treated well, in agreement with my precepts.

In numbers, the sides were evenly matched and I would have encouraged the Coalition to attack, confident that their superior leadership would win the battle. President Bush chose the correct path in dealing with his generals, following my advice, “He whose generals are able and not interfered with by the sovereign will be victorious.” Saddam, on the other hand, did not heed Chia Lin’s advice, “No evil is greater than commands of the sovereign from the court.”

The worst offensive policy would have been to attack the enemy’s cities with ground forces and the Coalition was wise not to attack Basrah or Baghdad. However, the use of air power to attack strategic targets in the cities was sound and this factor should be incorporated in my theory.

IV. Conclusions

In my analysis of the Gulf War I conclude that the U.S. strategy failed in the initial stage. Saddam Hussein's plan to attack Kuwait was not deterred nor was he forced to withdraw his forces without a battle. Why is this? I believe the explanation lies in the inherent uncertainties of intelligence to provide unambiguous strategic warning to the National Command Authority and the reluctance of the National Command Authority to employ national means in sufficient strength to deter potential aggression, based on less than certain intelligence. If this continues, it will prove extremely difficult and expensive for the U.S. to continue its effective leadership role given its diminishing armed forces and declining economic power.

In the preparation and execution of operational plans, the President and the Coalition forces receive high marks. The strength of the force was in its superior manpower, training, doctrine, equipment and intelligence. Its weakness, the excessive time required to place adequate force in the theater to effectively block an Iraqi attack that fortunately never came. On this point the entire operation could have been a calamity of great consequence had Saddam's forces continued their offensive into Saudi Arabia. This should give the U.S. cause for soberly evaluating its potential for military success in similar future encounters.

In the period following the cease fire, uncertainty exists regarding the ultimate success of the operation. The Coalition did not seek to overthrow Saddam and take over Iraq. The result is that Saddam remains in power and continues to pose a threat, albeit greatly diminished. Will the victory of the Gulf War result in long term stability in the region? Time will provide the ultimate answer regarding the success or failure of the Gulf War.